

Calvary Chapel  Philadelphia



CHILDREN'S MINISTRY TEACHER'S PACKET

1st Grade

Sunday Morning

Study 37

Stephen is Martyred

Stephen is Martyred

The Objective is the key concept for this weeks lesson. It should be the main focus of the study

These are the key verses that you will find helpful in teaching your study this week. The "Main passage" is the basis of the study, where the other verse support the objective of the lesson.

There is a memory verse for the students that relates to every study. If a student can memorize the verse for the following week you may give them a prize from the "reward box" found on your cart.

An introductory activity or question that will settle the class, draw their attention to the study and prepare their hearts for God's Word.

Objective This lesson will examine why Stephen was willing to give up his life for Jesus and encourage the class to have an eternal perspective.

Key Verses

Acts 6:8-15; 7:51-60—Main Teaching Passage

Acts 7:1-50 (Stephen's message)

Acts 6:1-7 (Stephen's background)

Matthew 16:24-27; Philippians 1:21; Revelation 12:11

Matthew 6:19-21

Memory Verse - Matthew 16:25

"For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it."

Hook

Review last week's memory verse, Hebrews 13:3.

Ask the person who loves candy the most in the whole class to raise their hand. Ask each of the students how far they would be willing to go to get a piece of candy. Would they be willing to pay money? Would they be willing to do extra chores for a month? Would they be willing to suffer?

When we love something, we are willing to do a lot, even suffer, to get it. In today's story, we are going to read about a man who loved Jesus so much, he was willing to suffer, and even die, for Him.

What does the Bible say? This is where we will read a passage or series of passages that teach on the subject of the day.

BOOK

In Acts 6, we are introduced to a believer named Stephen. In Acts 6:3, Stephen is described as “of good reputation” and “full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom.” In verse 8, we see that Stephen did miracles by the power of the Holy Spirit. He began to debate with other Jews about the truth of Christ, and they were unable to resist his wisdom. In response, these men stirred up the people, elders, and scribes and had Stephen arrested and taken before the council of the Jewish leaders. There they had lying witnesses accuse Stephen of blasphemy against the law and the temple (blasphemy means speaking of a holy person or thing in an unholy way). Then Stephen rose up to defend himself, and the Bible tells us that his face looked like the face of an angel.

Acts 7:1-50 recounts Stephen’s defense speech. We will not focus on the details of this message, but the main idea is summarized in verses 51-53. He went through Israel’s past and pointed out that the people of Israel had a long history of rejecting God’s messengers, and now they were rejecting him and others who taught about Jesus. This angered the council, and they took him outside the city to stone him (kill him by throwing rocks at him). Yet Stephen was full of the Spirit and saw heaven open and Jesus sitting at God’s right hand. As they stoned him, Stephen committed himself to God and asked Jesus not to hold this stoning against his persecutors.

LOOK

Last week, we talked about persecution and saw the first example of it happening to the Church. We saw that Peter and John were put into prison, but eventually they were let out. However, this would not always be the case for Christians. Stephen was the first person to lose his life for being a believer in Christ. It might be tempting to read Stephen’s story and see a tragedy—a man full of the Holy Spirit and with all kind of potential who met an early end. The world would look at Stephen’s life and think it was wasted. But that is not how God looks at things.

Stephen was a martyr. A martyr is a person who dies because of their witness for Christ. All throughout the New Testament, we see teaching on martyrdom and examples of people who valued Christ so much that they were willing to die for His sake. In Matthew 16:24-27, Jesus taught that following Him would require great suffering, but in the end there would be great reward. In Philippians 1:21, Paul said that for him, to live is Christ and to die is gain. In Revelation 12:11, we discover that Satan was defeated in part because the believers were willing to die

The interpretation/exegesis of the passage. What does this passage mean? How does this passage apply to my life?

LOOK (Continued)

rather than deny Jesus. The apostle James was executed for his faith in Acts 12, and while his actual execution is not recorded, Paul's path to martyrdom is recorded at the end of Acts.

What would make a person willing to do this? Why would someone give their life for the Lord? All martyrs have two things in common. First, they all had a zealous love for Christ. They were passionate for Him and saw Him as more valuable than any earthly fame, wealth, or power. The second trait is that they had an eternal perspective. They understood that although being a Christian would mean pain in this life, their short-term pain would turn into long-term gain when they enjoy for eternity the rewards of obeying Christ.

Although following Jesus might not lead to death for us, we can and should have the same mindset as the martyrs we read about in the Bible and those who have died throughout history for Christ's sake. We should cultivate a love for God that outweighs our love for money, possessions, comfort, popularity, and all else. We should love Jesus so much that we are willing to do whatever it takes, even suffer, to follow Him. We can develop an eternal perspective that realizes it is better to endure suffering and give things up on this earth so that we can store up treasures in heaven (Matthew 6:19-21) than to live the other way around.

What is my response to this passage of Scripture? How should my life change according to what this passage teaches me? What are the practical things I can do throughout the week to make this true in my life?

TOOK

As a class, memorize Matthew 16:25.

We can only love Jesus if we spend time with Him. Encourage the class to dedicate time each day this week to reading the Bible with their family and praying in order to grow their love for God.

Pray: Ask the Lord to give us a love for Him like Stephen had. Pray for an eternal perspective that seeks to store up treasures in heaven.

Parent Question: What does it mean to store up treasures in heaven (see Matthew 6:19-21)?

FURTHER STUDY

Commentary on Acts 6:8-15 & 7:51-60 by David Guzik

1. ([Act 6:8-10](#)) Stephen's witness for God.

And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen. And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke.

a. God did **great wonders and signs** through the apostles, but also through others like Stephen, one of the servants chosen to help the widows. Stephen was used of God because he was **full of faith and power**.

b. **Disputing with Stephen:** Stephen debated with Jews from **the Synagogue of the Freedmen**, empowered by the Holy Spirit, he shows greater wisdom (**they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke**).

i. There is no indication that Stephen, in himself, was smarter, better educated, or a better debater than these Jews. We should attribute his upper hand in the debate to **the Spirit by which he spoke**.

ii. **Those from Cilicia:** "The mention of Cilicia suggests this may have been Paul's synagogue before he was converted. He came from Tarsus in Cilicia." (Lovett)

2. ([Act 6:11-14](#)) The opposing Jews, defeated in debate, induce false accusations against Stephen.

Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon *him*, seized him, and brought *him* to the council. They also set up false witnesses who said, "This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us."

a. **They stirred up the people:** The opponents of Stephen could do nothing until they got popular opinion on their side. Previously, persecution against the apostles had been limited because popular opinion was with them ([Acts 2:47](#), [5:26](#)).

i. **They secretly induced men to say:** The opponents of Stephen could not win a fair fight, so they used lies and secret strategies to shape popular opinion against Stephen.

ii. Popular opinion can be easily shaped. The same crowds that praised Jesus ([Luke 19:35-40](#)) soon called for His crucifixion ([Luke 23:18-23](#)); then they loved the apostles ([Acts 2:47](#), [5:26](#)) but now cry out against Stephen. This is why we should never let popular opinion shape the vision or focus of the church, but let it rest on God's eternal Word.

iii. How did Luke know what the opponents of Stephen **secretly induced men to say**? Possibly, it was because a man named Saul of Tarsus was among the opponents, because some of them were from Paul's home region of Cilicia. Saul (who became known as Paul the apostle) may have told Luke about this incident.

b. The accusers brought their charges: **We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and**

God ... this man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law ... Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change customs. Significantly, many of the same false accusations were leveled against Jesus ([Matthew 26:59-61](#)). You are in a good place when people are treating you like they treated Jesus!

c. Why would they make such accusations? Because Stephen was clearly teaching that Jesus was greater than Moses; that Jesus was God; that Jesus was greater than the temple; that Jesus was the fulfillment of the law; and that Jesus was greater than their religious customs and traditions.

i. Of course, Stephen would never teach **against Moses and God**, but his glorification of Jesus would be twisted. Stephen would never **speak blasphemous words against this holy place** (the temple), but he would not make it an idol as many Jews in that day did. Stephen had his words twisted, and a false accusation was brought against him.

ii. "Whatever form of words Stephen used which gave rise to the accusation that he said Jesus would destroy the temple, he certainly grasped and expounded the inner meaning of Jesus' own words." (Bruce).

d. Several commentators imply or directly state that the thrust of Stephen's message - that Jesus supersedes the temple and its localized worship - was a doctrine that the apostles themselves must have shied away from proclaiming. This is purely unwarranted speculation. The demonstrated boldness of the apostles is undeniable proof that they withheld no truth from fear that it might be too controversial.

3. ([Act 6:15](#)) Stephen's countenance when accused.

And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel.

a. **His face as the face of an angel:** Stephen's face did not have that mild, soft, angelic look that we see in so many paintings; nor was it a look of stern judgment and wrath. Instead, his face reflected the perfect peace and confidence of one that knows and trusts his God. His face had the same reflected glory that Moses had as he beheld God intimately.

i. "The description is of a person who is close to God and reflects some of His glory as a result of being in his presence ([Exodus 34:29ff](#))." (Marshall)

b. **The face of an angel** also means that Stephen was at perfect peace. His face was not filled with fear or terror, because he knew his life was in God's hands and that Jesus never forsakes His people.

(For Acts 7:1-50, go to enduringword.com/commentary/acts-7/)

8. ([Act 7:51-53](#)) Stephen applies the sermon to his listeners.

*"You stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers *did*, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept *it*."*

a. **You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you:** One can imagine the angry whispering among the Sanhedrin as Stephen's history lesson begins to hit home. Stephen sees this and knows that they are rejecting the One God sent again, just like before.

b. Drawing on concepts from the Old Testament, Stephen rebukes those who rejected Jesus; they are **stiff-necked** (as Israel is described in passages like [Exodus 32:9](#)), and they are **uncircumcised in heart and ears**

(as Israel is described in passages like [Jeremiah 9:26](#)). In using the two phrases together, he may have in mind a passage like [Deuteronomy 10:16](#): *Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer.*

- i. Almost 20 times in the Old Testament, God calls Israel **stiff-necked**. These religious leaders are being just as their fathers were.
- ii. Israel prided itself on the sign of circumcision because it separated them from the Gentiles, but Stephen was essentially saying, "you are just like the Gentiles in your rejection of the Lord."
- c. His main point was unmistakable: "As Israel was in its history, so you are today, **you now have become the betrayers and murderers.**" Israel was proud that they had received the law of God and were guardians of the law, but Stephen reminded them, "you **have not kept it.**"

9. Observations on Stephen's message.

- a. Stephen's message is essentially twofold. First, *God is no respecter of places*. That is, though the temple was a wonderful gift from God, it was wrong to overemphasize it as "the house of God." Second, *Israel is guilty of what they have always been guilty of: Rejecting God's messengers.*
- b. Jesus said that it is impossible for old wineskins to hold new wine ([Matthew 9:17](#)). Through Stephen, the Holy Spirit is showing how the old traditions of Judaism (especially the over-emphasis on the temple) cannot contain the new wine of Christianity.
- c. God used Stephen's coming martyrdom to send the church out into the entire world, but God also used Stephen's message to show that there was no theological reason to prevent the gospel from going to the Gentiles.
 - i. The whole idea behind a permanent, stationary temple is "you come to me." This is why Israel, though they were a light to the nations, mainly thought in terms of the world coming to *them* for salvation. Through the church, God would show a different heart: "I will come to you," including the Gentiles.
 - d. The greatness of Stephen's sermon is not only in its content, but in its courage. "He takes the sharp knife of the Word and rips up the sins of the people, laying open the inward parts of their hearts, and the secrets of their souls ... He could not have delivered that searching address with greater fearlessness had he been assured that they would thank him for the operation; the fact that his death was certain had no other effect upon him than to make him yet more zealous." (Spurgeon)

B. Reaction to the sermon of Stephen.

1. ([Act 7:54](#)) They **were cut to the heart**, and convicted by the Holy Spirit. Yet the Sanhedrin reacted with rage instead of submission to the Holy Spirit.

When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with *their* teeth.

- a. They show great anger, but who, really, are they angry with? Stephen is only the messenger. Their real anger is directed against the God they are rejecting.
- b. The idea of **gnashing at him with their teeth** can't help but remind us of the imagery of Hell. Seven different times, Jesus described Hell as a place of *weeping and gnashing of teeth* ([Matthew 8:12](#)).
 - i. These men were prominent, successful, and appeared to be religious; yet they were rejecting God and revealing themselves as citizens of Hell.

ii. They didn't start **gnashing** when Stephen finished his speech. "All they could do in their frenzy was to gnash with their teeth. It was not a sudden outburst but the tense rather shows that it was prolonged." (Gaebelein)

2. ([Act 7:55-56](#)) Stephen's vision of Jesus.

But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"

a. We are reminded again that Stephen was **full of the Holy Spirit**; this was the source of his courage, wisdom and power in preaching.

i. J.B. Phillips' translation has insight: *Stephen, filled through all his being with the Holy Spirit*. This is how we should be filled with the Holy Spirit!

b. **Saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God**: It is difficult to describe exactly what Stephen saw. We can't say if this was a personal vision or if some sort of "window to heaven" was opened, but going beyond the plain description of the text is pure speculation.

c. **Jesus standing at the right hand of God**: It is significant to note Jesus is **standing** here, as opposed to the more common description of Him *sitting* ([Matthew 26:64](#), [Colossians 3:1](#)) at the right hand of the Father.

i. Why is **Jesus standing** here? Jesus stands in solidarity with Stephen at this moment of crisis. He does not impassionately react to the problems of His people.

ii. We might also consider that Jesus is standing to give a "standing ovation" to Stephen, whose fate makes him unique among believers. Stephen is the first of all martyrs among the followers of Jesus.

iii. "Stephen has been confessing Christ before men, and now he sees Christ confessing his servant before God." (Bruce)

3. ([Act 7:57-58](#)) The execution of Stephen by stoning.

Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; and they cast *him* out of the city and stoned *him*. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

a. When Stephen declared that he saw Jesus *standing at the right hand of God*, it was too much. The Sanhedrin react quickly, violently, and together. When Jesus, before this same body of men, declared that He would sit at the right hand of God, they had the same reaction and sealed his death as a blasphemer ([Matthew 26:64-66](#)).

i. "For Stephen to suggest that the crucified Jesus stood in a position of authority at the right hand of God must have ranked as blasphemy in the thinking of those who knew that a crucified man died under the divine curse." (Bruce)

b. **They cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord**: These were distinguished, older men acting this way! The reaction of the Sanhedrin seems extreme, but is typical of those rejecting God and lost in spiritual insanity. They wail in agony and cover their ears at the revelation of God, which they regard as blasphemy.

i. What a dangerous thing it is to be religious apart from a real relationship with Jesus Christ! This fulfills what Jesus warned about in [John 16:2-3](#): *Yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God*

service. And these things they will do to you because they have not known the Father nor Me.

c. **Ran at him** uses the Greek word *hormao*. This is the same word used to describe the mad rush of the herd of swine into the sea ([Mark 5:13](#)). This was an out-of-control mob rushing at Stephen.

d. **They cast him out of the city and stoned him:** The extent of their rage is shown by their execution of Stephen, which was done without regard for Roman law, and which was performed according to traditional Jewish custom (stoning).

i. The second-century Jewish writing *Mishnah*, describes the practice of stoning: "When the trial is finished, the man convicted is brought out to be stoned ... When ten cubits from the place of stoning they say to him, 'Confess, for it is the custom of all about to be put to death to make confession, and every one who confesses has a share in the age to come' ... Four cubits from the place of stoning the criminal is stripped ... The drop from the place of stoning was twice the height of a man. One of the witnesses pushes the criminal from behind, so that he falls face downward. He is then turned over on his back. If he dies from this fall, that is sufficient. If not, the second witness takes the stone and drops it on his heart. If this causes death, that is sufficient; if not, he is stoned by all the congregation of Israel." (Cited in Bruce)

e. **And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul:** Saul stood there as the "supervisor" of the operation. As a member of the Sanhedrin, he had also approved of Stephen's execution.

i. **Young man** literally means, "a man in his prime." It certainly does not mean that Saul wasn't old enough to be a member of the Sanhedrin. In [Acts 26:10](#), Paul says *I cast my vote against them*, and the plain implication was that he had a vote as a member of the Sanhedrin.

4. ([Act 7:59-60](#)) Stephen's last words.

And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on *God* and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

a. **They stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."** His life ended in the same way it had been lived: In complete trust in God, believing that Jesus would take care of him in the life to come.

i. "The fires ... in the olden days never made martyrs; they revealed them. No hurricane of persecution ever creates martyrs; it reveals them. Stephen was a martyr before they stoned him. He was the first martyr to seal his testimony with his blood." (Morgan)

b. **Lord, do not charge them with this sin:** God answered Stephen's prayer, and used it to touch the heart of a man who energetically agreed with his stoning, though the man didn't know the prayer was being answered. When we get to heaven, make sure to look up Stephen and thank him for every blessing brought through the ministry of Saul of Tarsus.

i. God heard Stephen's prayer, and Paul is the evidence of it. We have no idea how greatly God can use us in our times of suffering.

ii. Augustine said, "If Stephen had not prayed, the church would not have had Paul."

c. **Cried out with a loud voice, Lord, do not charge them with this sin:** Stephen displays the same forgiving attitude that Jesus had on the cross ([Luke 23:34](#)). He asked God to forgive his accusers, and he made the promises loudly and publicly.

i. If the gospels contain that which Jesus *began* to do and to teach, they also only contain that which Jesus *began* to suffer. There is a sense in which Jesus suffers along with Stephen as he is martyred now.

d. **He fell asleep:** Tenderly, the text notes that Stephen did not "die." Instead, he merely **fell asleep**, and woke up in a much better world.

i. If Stephen **fell asleep**, the church had to wake up. "If there had been any rose-colored optimism about quickly winning the Jewish people to their Messiah, that was gone. The Church could not expect triumph without a bloody battle." (LaSor)

e. Stephen wasn't a superman, but he was a man filled through all his being with the Holy Spirit. You have no idea of how greatly you can be used of God as you walk in the power of the Holy Spirit.